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Central Intelligence Agency

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Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

14 February 1985

Tensions on the China-Vietnam Border: The Cambodian Factor

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SUMMARY

The uneven tempo of Chinese military activity along the Vietnamese border has caused ASEAN--and some Western observers--to question Beijing's commitment to opposing Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. The Thai in particular have complained about what they view as China's tardy and inadequate responses. But in fact, China's military pressure on Vietnam has been at an unusually high level since last spring, and Chinese activity during the Cambodian dry season this year far exceeds the comparable period last year.

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the Chinese have taken and continue to hold small pieces of Vietnamese territory.

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The problem is, in part, one of perception. The Chinese appear to have changed their tactics from intermittent, highly publicized assaults to more sustained, less visible military pressure, while observers are still looking for the reactive, showy actions of past years. We also believe Beijing's relations with Moscow and Washington now have a greater influence on Chinese action along the border than Vietnamese operations in Cambodia or China's normal concern about relations with ASEAN. If Beijing, however, believes that its relations with ASEAN would be seriously damaged, we would look for a larger ground assault near Malipo, wider

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pressure on the border, or perhaps even limited airstrikes. But Beijing is unlikely to exercise the costly option of a major "second lesson" unless Thailand's national security is threatened. [REDACTED]

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Military Activity Heats Up

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- o In May, China's South Sea Fleet sent a naval task group to the disputed Spratly Islands, the first time major Chinese combatants had been there. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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Chinese media reports suggest that Beijing has sent troops from seven of its 11 military regions--more than at any time since the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979 [REDACTED]

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But Thailand Complains

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The absence of a sharp response to Vietnam's largest Cambodian offensive in six years provoked criticism from Thai officials recently. The Thai believe that they have an understanding with Beijing that Chinese pressure would be increased along Vietnam's northern border during periods of Vietnamese attacks against the resistance, as well as an explicit agreement from Beijing to strike at Vietnam if Vietnamese troops enter Thai territory in force. Beginning in late December, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi began to

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[redacted]

voice his unhappiness with China's apparent lack of forcefulness.

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With the already high level of activity, the Chinese may believe their response has been adequate. Wu, in fact, noted in Bangkok that the China-Vietnam border had not been quiet, that shelling had been very heavy during Vietnamese assaults in Cambodia in late December, and that the Chinese had taken additional hilltops inside Vietnam in mid-January.

[redacted]

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The Chinese seek to have those who need them come with hat in hand. In the case of the Vietnamese operations against the non-Communist resistance in the last two months, Beijing may have held back in part waiting for the Thai to ask for help--chips to be cashed in later.

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Beijing's Past Performance

The Chinese in any event are unlikely to gear their military activity solely to the situation in Cambodia. Beijing is certainly aware that even if it drastically expands the fighting, the benefit to the Cambodian resistance and the Thai would be minimal. Since the beginning of the conflict in 1979, the Chinese have adjusted the level of military activity in response to a variety of other concerns.

- o The increase in military activity last spring--including the naval activity near the Spratlys and the seizure of Vietnamese territory--was in response to the unprecedented joint Soviet-Vietnamese amphibious exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin.
- o The Chinese traditionally have manipulated border activity coinciding with high-level exchanges with the United States to suggest tacit US support. China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 came close on the heels of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's visit to Washington. During President Reagan's visit to Beijing in April, the Chinese crossed the Vietnamese border and seized the hilltops south of Malipo--the first division-sized attack since 1979. And China timed the upsurge in fighting last month to coincide with General Vessey's visit.
- o The increase in activity in late summer may have been an attempt to forestall any Vietnamese counterattack that would embarrass the Chinese during the first major military parade in 25 years.

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Beijing's Concerns Today

We believe that broader strategic considerations have similarly played a larger role than regional factors in Beijing's recent calculations, just as they did last April. In April, the Chinese wanted to send a signal to Moscow that they could not be intimidated from putting military pressure on Vietnam. They also wanted to underscore their strategic value in the region to the United States. [REDACTED]

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Having subsequently improved their security relationship with the United States, we believe the Chinese believed themselves to be in a better position by December to take a few small steps forward with the USSR, confident that the Soviets would not misinterpret the gesture as weakness. As a consequence, Beijing did not want an upsurge in fighting on the border to jeopardize the visit of Soviet First Deputy Premier Arkhipov a second time. Nor did they want to upset Moscow by launching new attacks on Vietnam immediately after Arkhipov's departure. [REDACTED]

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Beijing undoubtedly hoped to use the visit in part to feed Vietnamese suspicions of Sino-Soviet collusion. By the same token, the Chinese probably wanted to remind skeptics in Washington that China still maintains some maneuvering room within the triangle, and that its "independent foreign policy" is not just rhetoric. [REDACTED]

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The Price Beijing Pays

By adhering to a timetable of its own in applying military pressure to Vietnam, China has placed some strain on its relations with ASEAN, particularly Thailand. Thai officials who favor a strong relationship with Beijing ran the risk of political embarrassment at the tardy Chinese response to this year's Vietnamese campaign against the non-Communist resistance camps. Those circles in ASEAN that suspect that China will fight only to protect the Communist Democratic Kampuchea guerrillas have new grist for their mills the longer China delays what they believe should be stronger military action. [REDACTED]

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Although Hanoi is aware of current Chinese military activity along the border [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] it must also be picking up the grumbling of the Cambodian resistance leaders who believe China should be doing more. This could embolden Hanoi in believing it ultimately will divide and wear down the backers of the resistance coalition. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

If the Chinese fail to make a conspicuous demonstration of force against Vietnam, observers may suspect that the standdown in criticism of the Soviets at the time of the Arkhipov visit, plus the moderate tone emanating from Hanoi about the prospects for a political settlement in Indochina mean the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Soviets are approaching an understanding. We believe the Chinese would not want such a perception to go very far for fear of undermining their relationship with the United States and ASEAN and thus encouraging Vietnam. [REDACTED]

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What's Next

Given that tensions along the Vietnamese border affect major facets of Chinese international relations, the Chinese will weigh these numerous factors before initiating any major new assaults on the Vietnamese. They may be willing to risk ASEAN ire if they believe their wider objectives can be served by restraint. Given China's determination over the long term to wear Vietnam down and to drive a wedge between Hanoi and Moscow, there is no question that pressure on Vietnam will continue, but its form and intensity will be molded by strategic considerations beyond the Cambodian context. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] China can initiate strong military action at any time. Moreover, if China brings its main force armies in Guangzhou Military Region closer to the border--as it did in 1984--it would add 150,000 combat troops to the estimated 180,000 now on the border. [REDACTED]

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At the least, we expect the Chinese to continue maneuvering ground, naval, and air forces to keep the Vietnamese off balance, and to keep up the shelling, border incursions, and seizure of small pieces of Vietnamese territory. If Beijing believes that its relations with ASEAN would be seriously damaged by the absence of stronger military action in the face of further Vietnamese pressure on Cambodian resistance bases, we would look for a larger ground assault, pressure along a wider salient of the border, or perhaps even limited airstrikes. However, Beijing will weigh all factors before it initiates major action and China is unlikely to exercise the costly option of a "second lesson" unless Thailand's national security is threatened. [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: Tensions on the China-Vietnam Border: The Cambodian Factor (U)

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